AFRICAN STATES IN THE NEW WORLD ? REMARKS ON THE TRADITION OF TRANSATLANTIC RESISTANCE

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It is a typical and widespread historical misconception to attribute monocausal significance for the emergence of the so–called "Third World" to the effects upon non–European peoples of the political, demographic and cultural stimuli emanating from Europe since the 15th century. This view of global history, common as it is among liberal historians as well as social scientists, essentially defines the "Third World" as a function of European intervention into the affairs of indigenous societies. Although we certainly would no longer go so far as to deny the "pre–Colombian" historicity of such societies *in toto,* we nevertheless tend to consider their historical role in the events following their "discovery" as passive or, at best, reactive.

In this regard, our conceptions are characteristically linked to concrete images: Ever since Las Casas' reports about the devastation of the Indies, stereotypes of the overpowering onslaught of a higher civilization upon helpless natives have shaped our views of a historical constellation between European perpetrators and "primitive" victims overseas. With the words of Karl Marx we understand the "discovery of gold and silver lands in the Americas; the extermination, enslavement and burying of the native populations in the mines; [...] the conquest and plundering of the East Indies; the transformation of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins" (Marx/Engels 1972, xxiii:779), as well as the resulting colonial subjugation, as the decisive factors in the development of the non–European world.

Even if today, this view no longer serves as a rationalization of imperialistic claims to superiority, but rather arouses feelings of guilt,[1] the fact remains that we continue to define the indigenous societies of Africa,

[1]The rather complex aggregate of images and beliefs associated with the historical role of "The West" vis a vis "the others" in the mind of liberal intellectuals is well analyzed in Hoetink's critique of Toynbee. Rather caustically, the Dutch sociologist refers to the respective views and attitudes current among his colleagues in the early 60's as a "counterpanrt of colonial derangement" manifesting itself, among other things, in the "Western *Zeitgeist* of downfall and the emotions linked with it, of guilt and penance, of sin and punishment" (HOETINK 1967:76).

Asia and the New World as objects of European history-making. At least up to the point of anticolonial movements, the role of these peoples as historical subjects is commonly perceived as incidental.

The German ethnologist Wilhelm Mühlmann, for example, seriously speaks of "native peoples" as evidencing historical "variability", but not "history" in the sense of larger, consciously initiated changes concurring with "changes in the state of mind",*unless,* according to Mühlmann, having experienced, either directly or indirectly, an impetus for change from an "advanced civilization" (Mühlmann 1962:280ff.). An excerpt from Mühlmann's casuistry may illustrate this thesis:

> No examination of culture traits will bear out the conclusion that "European influence" affected, for example, the Zulu expansion under Shaka. We do know, however, that Dingiswayo, Shaka's predecessor, was inspired by the imperialistic *model* of English rule in Capetown, and the troups stationed there. This was the stimulus for the Zulu, injecting them with ideas of military organization and "political magnitude" (ibid.: 282 seq., my emphasis).

In other words, even the mere *idea* of being historically active was borrowed from the Europeans.

Regarding the Caribbean, a similar though more complex case of such reasoning can be discerned in Roger Bastide's attempt to explain the apparent lack of chiliastic movements in Afro-American societies; starting out from Max Weber's concept of a "theodicy of the negatively privileged", as manifested in expectations of eschatological retribution, Bastide poses the question why New World blacks, who, after all, represent a typical Paria group, did not participate in messianic/millenaristic movements before the end of slavery and, apart from a few recent exceptions (e.g. Black Islam, Rastafari), produced hardly any movements of this kind worth mentioning.

According to Bastide, this is especially remarkable in the case of Brazil, a classical region of New World millenarisms, where at most a small number of creole slaves participated in otherwise multiethnic movements of chiliastic nature.

Bastide's explanation for the lack of social dynamics of this type among Afro-Brazilians largely rests on the assumption of an absence of eschatological ideas in African religions, the concept of final redemption allegedly being foreign to the circular understanding of time in the traditional belief systems of Africans. Therefore, Bastide argues, an important ideological stimulus for resistance to the white oppressors which can be observed in many colonial situations, either never came to fruition among Afro-Brazilians, or else only developed after traditional "collective representations" were rejected. This, he adds, differs from the case

of the Tupí–Guaraní, whose mythology includes pronounced apocalyptic elements, and from that of the Christianity–influenced caboclos and the highly acculturated creole blacks (cf. Bastide 1978:357f., 361f. and Bastide 1961 passim).

In a passage all too reminiscent of Lévy–Bruhl's theories of a "primitive mentality", Bastide thus succeeds in both romanticising what he takes to be "the African world view" *and* declaring it an ideological barrier to the development of historical conciousness:[2]

> In the African religions man is in harmony with nature; the rythm of his social life is attuned to that of cosmic life [...]. These are not religions of hope or social protest. They seem unable to furnish the mythic frameworks necessary for prophetic proclamations of civilizing heroes who will reappear in an apocalypse [...]. Before a messianism offering the blacks revenge upon the whites [...] can emerge, two conditions are necessary. First, Christianity must have broken with the African religions by preaching the damnation of the sinner and his salvation through rebirth and the dogma of the Cross– tenets that, in killing the old Adam, kill the old native civilization, too. Second, to replace what has been destroyed and to fill the gap, Protestantism must have introduced the sense of history, the sense of serial time, the Old Testament of the prophecies of the messiah and the apocalypse in which Christ the Redeemer will return to restore justice (Bastide 1978:361).

Bastide's thesis (contradictory as it seems to be, even within the context of his own work) can, of course, be refuted by reference to African examples such as the early 18th century "Antonian (Kimpa Vita) Movement" in the lower Congo (cf. Axelson 1970).[3] Within the context of our discussion, however, the significance of this theory lies in that fact that, for Bastide, an "African world view" – whatever that is – apparently offers sufficient grounds for denying the slaves the kind of conciousness we would consider a prerequisite for history–making.

He concedes that they rebelled out of sheer desperation – but not in order to purposely bring about wide – reaching change; not political motives, but "tribal regression" and escapist longings for an Africa forever

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[2]Cf. HORTON 1970 for a cogent discussion of the ideological background to Bastide's understanding of African culture.

[3]See algo JANZEN 1977 on what he calls "the tradition of renewal in Kongo religion"; BOHANNON 1958 on "extra–processual events" in precolonial Tiv society; and DE BEET / THODEN VAN VELZEN 1977, THODEN VAN VELZEN 1978 and THODEN VAN VELZEN / VAN WETERING 1983 for an Afro–american example clearly contradicting Bastide's smug hypothesis.

lost, propelled their collective action in marronage (op. cit.: 93).[4] What else but aimless, spontaneous outbursts could such blacks, untainted as it were by the "influence of advanced civilizations", have set against their white oppressors?

I would suggest: the very means of their traditional cultures, which – as I will try to indicate in the following – were in principle entirely appropriate for "history-making". I shall once more begin with an example: More than 20 years ago, the africanist R.K. Kent, in his widely noted study, *Palmares: an African State in Brazil,* reached the following conclusion about the historical significance of this enclave of runaway slaves in the Pernambuco backcountry comprising at its height an approximate number of 15–20,000 inhabitants: Palmares, Kent argued, offers sufficient grounds for the hypothesis that

> an African political system could be transferred to a different continent; that it could come to govern not only individuals from a variety of ethnic groups in Africa but also those born in Brazil, pitch black or almost white, latinized, or close to Amerindian roots; and that it could endure for almost a full century [i.e. from approx. 1602 to 1695] against two Europen powers, Holland and Portugal (Kent 1965:175).

Moreover, according to Kent, the demographic and territorial expansion of this monarchically structured multi-ethnic state at times seriously threatened European predominance in Brazil. If the Paulistan *Bandeirantes,* who were called for assitance, had not finally succeeded in destroying Palmares, "the Portuguese [according to Kent] might well have found themselves hugging the littoral and facing not one, but a number of independent African states dominating the backlands of 18th century Brazil" (Kent 1965:174).

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[4]From a Marxist perspective, the historian Eugene Genovese comes to a basically similar conclusion: Following Hobsbawm's analysis of European peasant revolts, he sees the motivations of early Afro- American slave revolts and maroon communities as "reactionary" in nature. Because the "early maroon vision" (as he calls it) solely focussed on the reconstruction of traditional African structures, it prevented the blacks from confronting the emerging bourgeois-capitalist world and led, therefore, to their withdrawal from the "mainstream of history". Black resistance did not become *historical* (i.e. aimed at progressive changes in society as a whole) in character until the adoption of bourgeois-democratic ideology in the course of the Haitian revolution. Thus Genovese, too, declares historicity to be a monopoly of European or European-influenced cultures. The idea that transplanted Africans might merely have thought in different culturally patterned historical categories – as Richard Price documented so well in his excellent *First Time* – apparently cannot be reconciled with Genovese's understanding of history (cf. GENOVESE 1979:182–125).

In this regard, the 17th century indeed suggests a number of "what–if" questions: For almost simultaneously with the emergence of Palmares, whose organization was patterned after the Bantu–states of western Central Africa, Afro–American state–like formations arose in several regions of the Spanish Main; the first decade of the century thus saw the emergence of the *palenque* San Lorenzo de los Negros under the rule of the Bron(g) descendant Yanga in the vicinity of Veracruz (Davidson 1966), and the *palenque* San Basilio near Cartagena de las Indias, ruled by the Bioho Domingo, also known as "King Benkos" (Escalante 1973).

All three cases, as well as the group organized around "King Bayano" in 16th century Panama, represented political units whose leaders, according to the sources, had already held royal offices in their homelands. Some of them not only succeeded in reasserting their leadership qualities in the New World, but also invested their positions with the kind of sacral dignity, known from contemporary reports on Africa potentates.

Yanga, for example, forbid the killing of Spanish prisoners who had seen his royal face (Davidson 1966). Ganga Zumba, the elected ruler of Palmares, whose name alone denotes priestly functions,[5] divided his kingdom into several "mocambos"[6] (political–military subdivisions) for which he chose individual commanders, thereby not only achieving a form of administration suited to the requirements of a state at war, but also succesfully reproducing the structure of contemporary Bantu– kingdoms.[7]

Palmares had a royal council responsible for policy decisions, a police–like control and sanctioning apparatus noted with amazement in contemporary reports, an institutionalized priest–hood, and an efficient economic system characterized by a considerable degree of division of labor (cf. Carneiro 1947, Ennes 1948, Diggs 1953, Kent 1965 and Lara 1977). Moreover, Ganga Zumba seems to have consciously pursued a strategy aimed at entrenching and expanding his power. He appointed his rela-

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[5]In Kikongo and other Bantu languages, "nganga" denotes the office of a religious specialist and healer (cf. BENTLEY 1967; LAMAN 1962). In this regard, MILLER (1976:254) gives a hint well worth further investigation: According to 17th century Italian sources, *nganga a nzumbi* was the Imbangala term for priests of a specific category of ancestral spirits. See also GONZALEZ HUGUET / BAUDRY 1967, and CABRERA 1954, regarding the transfer of the nganga–complex to Cuba.

[6]According to KENT (1965:164), this term, which in colonial Brazil came to designate runaway slave communities in general, derives from the Ambundu word "mukambo" which he translates as "hide–out".

[7]Similarly, the so–called "old Kongo kingdom" consisted of six province–like administrative districts, the local rulers of which paid tribute to an were subjects of the *mani kongo,* who resided in the capital city of *mbanza kongo* (Sao Salvador). Here, too, the *mani kongo,* as head of the state, appointed these provincial regents (cf., for example, the description in VANSINA 1965).

tives to important governmental positions and, as early as the mid–17th century, the consolidation of a royal lineage was clearly evident (Kent 1965: passim).

Benkos, too, seemed to have been on the verge of securing the privileges of a royal lineage for his family, reunited in *cimarronage,* when his daughter, Princess Orika, ironically enough, betrayed him to her former owner and lover, Francisco de Campos, who had accidentally been captured by Benkos' troops but later released (Esclanate 1973:78).

There is no doubt that in all of these cases former slaves succeeded in transferring African models of political organization to the New World, obviously underpinning them with traditional ideas about power and legitimacy. These were not the disorganized hide–outs of frightened "primitives", incapable of a calculated action of historical moment. On the contrary, as Kent points out (1965:175), these cases offer abundant proof for the amazing "vitality of the traditional African art in governing men".

These examples, however, provide food for thought in yet another respect – similar to Jamaica's Windward and Leeward Maroons emerging after 1655 (Patterson 1970, Kopytoff 1978); the group around Francisque Faboulé on Martinique, estimated as consisting of 400–500 members in 1665 (Debien 1973:108); and the core groups of the later Bush Negro tribes in Surinam which consolidated around 1670, Palmares, San Lorenzo and San Basilio achieved a level of military strength which – if only temporarily – granted them the significance of politically decisive powers within their respective regional contexts. In other words, they not only managed to defend their autonomy; whether through actual raids or by virtue of their mere presence, they also threatened the existence – or at least the further expansion – of the slave–holding societies of the European colonists.

In this respect, knowledge of subsequent historical developments often blinds us to the facts of the early stages of colonization: Aside from maybe Nueva España, the 17th century European colonial societies in the Americas represented rather precarious formations whose structural weakness and lack of integration rendered them highly susceptible to destabilization by both international wars and internal conflict. Especially in the Spanish Caribbean, the centrally organized "estado poblador" was hardly more than a legal figment of metropolitan imagination corresponding to a reality of frontier societies ridden with insubordination and centrifugal tendencies.

Concerning Cuba, for example, the early colonial documents examined by Wright (1970) confirm that the proverbial principle of "obedezco pero no cumplo" gave rise to a Hobbesian "dog–eat–dog" world in regions which, like Cuba, descended in importance to a peripheral position

within the Spanish Empire.[8] Even on Española, which remained fairly productive even after 1600, the decline of state control had, by that time, become an endemic syndrome. While there the extermination of the native American population had momentarily created a power vacuum beyond the Spanish frontier, similar border situations emerged in the confrontation with rapidly developing multi–ethnic pirate communities, characterized by Steger (1973:186f.) as an "anarchist counter–state", as well as against the large number of slaves which had taken to the woods and rebanded into powerful maroon communities.[9]

In addition, the colony had literally been sitting on a powder keg. While the plantation system had brought temporary prosperity to the Spaniards on Española, its enormous need for black labor had created an increasingly risky political situation. According to the Italian traveller Benzoni (1969:65), it was rumored as early as the middle of the 16th century that the island would soon fall into the hands of the blacks, and around 1570, 5000–6000 Spaniards faced an army of over 7000 *cimarrones* and more than 20,000 slaves being arduously held in check (Andrews 1978:15, Bonetti 1984:146ff.).

We do not know how the *cimarrones* of the Sierra de Baoruco on the western border of the Spanish–controlled area were organized, but it is certain that their attacks, some of which were supported by pirates, seriously threatened the colony several times and effectively prevented the tramontane settlement ot the island.[10]

Here, as in the case of Brazil, a comparison with the early Portuguese attempts to colonize Angola seems to suggest itself: for there, too, com-

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[8]Probably the most vivid account of the caothic nature of Ibero–Cuban society during the first two centuries of settlement is given by ORTIZ 1975.

[9]This situation was agravated by the international conflict: Just as the "pirate state" on La Tortuga formed a bridgehead for the French invasion, the maroon groups exploited the European conflict by using deliberate partisanship to weaken their greatest enemies. By the late 16th century, if we can believe the authors of *Sir Francis Drake Revived* (1628), Panama, for example, was honey–combed with a tightly organized network of mobile maroon groups whose cooperation and excellent military–ecological adaptation to the tropical terrain might have greatly contributed to Drake's success (cf. WRIGHT 1932:253–331).

[10]In the case of Española/Saint Domingue there seems to be some justification for interpreting these early large–scale *palenques* as the first signifiant expression of a tradition of resistance, persisting unaffected by the European change of power, in order to culminate eventually in the cataclysm of the Haitian Revolution. In my opinion, Leslie F. Manigat poses a very convincing argument as to how marronage on Saint Domingue as a "cumulative", and – within the slave society – "total" phenomenon, became part of a broad stream of historical events in the second half of the 18th century, and finally merged with the revolution in the 1790's under the leadership of Boukman and Romaine la Prophetesse (cf. MANIGAT 1977).

plex frontier situations evolved which, at times, came close to thwarting the Portuguese colonial effort. Newly founded African war states such as Matamba, under the famous Queen Nzinga, and the Imbangala–Mbundu state Kasanje succeeded in cutting off all inland access to the Europeans, weakened as they were by lack of discipline and internal dissension.

This analogy seems all the more compelling since, although these recent state–formations represented a direct reaction to Portuguese intervention, they nevertheless clearly fell within the continuum of a precolonial tradition of political organization centering on the consolidation of migrant groups, refugees and war parties into heterogeneous states of expansive character.[11]

As Igor Kopytoff recently emphasized, this tradition may well represent a characteristic feature of sociogenic processes in Africa:

> Contrary to a previously widespread stereotype of sub–Saharan Africa as a continent mired in timeless immobility, its history has emerged to be a ceaseless flux among populations that, in comparison to other continents, are relatively recent occupants of their present habitat. In brief, Africa is a "frontier continent" (Kopytoff 1987:7).

This notion, I believe, could well serve as a starting point for further research into what might, upon closer inspection, turn out to be a transatlantic political tradition – a tradition which led to the transmission to a Brazilian situation of at least the name, though probably also the content of the state–forming *Ki–lombo* warrior society of the Imbangala.[12]

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[11]Cf. VANSINA 1966:124–155, BIRMINGHAM 1966:78–132; and MILLER 1976 passim.

[12]Not unlike the Brazilian maroon communities known as "quilombos", the Imbangala were an ethnically heterogeneous group which developed as a result of the conflicts in political frontier situations in Angola in the late 16th century. Although the word *kilombo* usually appears in contemporary accounts (as in CAVAZZI 1694:241, with the spelling "Chilombo") as a term for armycamp–like mobile settlements, Miller has shown that the *kilombo* can be considered a distinct pattern of social organization facilitating the reproduction of societies through the assimilation of foreign individuals. According to his analysis, the *kilombo* was an extremely centralized societal form which evolved out of a series of political innovations and was based on the model of cross–lineage warrior societies (cf. the report of Andrew Battell, an Englishman captured *and* "adopted" by Imbangala raiders in 1506, in: RAVENSTEIN 1901). Of course, the available sources do not permit sufficient documentation of the diffusion of the internal structure of the *kilombo* to Brazil. However, it seems reasonable to assume that organizational forms like the *kilombo*, developed in African frontier situations, might have served as models in the emergence of some Brazilian "quilombos" (cf. MILLER 1976:224–264, regarding the developmental history and ideology of the "African version" of the *kilombo*; see also LARA 1977, for an innovative though somewhat far–fetched hypothesis concerning its transfer to

In any case, Kopytoff's comments concerning *intra-African* frontiers apply to New World situations as well: "In all these instances", he writes, "displaced Africans faced the problem of forging a new social order in the midst of an effective institutional vacuum" (Kopytoff 1987:7); and in both hemispheres, their efforts invariably clashed with the hegemonial interests of the colonializing powers. In both the Old and the New Worlds, Europeans aimed at establishing and securing extractive economies – either based on the exportation of slaves, or of tropical consumer goods produced by these slaves. In both cases, they eventually succeeded in wearing down and often breaking the African resistance.

This was not, however, a process which could *a priori* have been predicted on the grounds of the "superiority" of their civilization, nor from their mind-set as Westerners endowed with that "special sense of history" allegedly lacking among their "primitive" contemporaries at the eve of European world domination.

Surinam, where the "weglopers" finally achieved a hard- won political independence in 1762 and thus stopped Dutch inland expansion once and for all; and Haiti, the first – although belatedly, nevertheless internationally recognized – "Black Republic", which proved able to resist even Napoleon's troops, offer a correction factor by which we might more accurately measure the "historical potential" of the non-European world.

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